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ABSTRACT

Black student alienation in liberal arts colleges is discussed. A study was conducted of eight four-year liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. Respondents included 267 black students, nearly 60% of all black students enrolled. A standard alienation scale measured feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social estrangement, and estrangement from work. Results showed a high degree of normlessness contrasted with low overall powerlessness. This suggests that black students believe opportunities for advancement do exist, but not within the prevailing normative structure. Other results showed high social estrangement in black females living on campus, students from the suburbs living on campus, and nursing majors. This lack of integration probably stems from the ethnocentric nature of the institutions. Changes are recommended in terms of recruitment of more black and other minority students and faculty, a strong black student association headed by a black student advisor, well-developed black studies programs, tutoring services for inadequately prepared black freshmen, and a faculty committee on minority education. Although drastic institutional change might harm its relationship with its founding and sustaining ethnic group, certain actions need to be taken toward proper integration. (AV)

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THE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE:
DESEGREGATION WITHOUT INTEGRATION

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Prior to 1965, when one spoke of students in liberal arts colleges, he/she was almost certainly referrring to white students, as such colleges tended for the most part to be exclusive, Anglo-Saxon, educational enclaves. The turbulence of the sixties, with Black Power, burning cities, and boycotts changed all that. Fearing charges of racism, liberal arts colleges followed the major universities' lead in not only admitting, but also recruiting black students.

Alienation Study

Despite their increasing numbers, black students at liberal arts colleges are a vastly under-researched group. The popular and scholarly literature treats black disenchantment in large institutions, but there remains a pressing need for examinations of the situation in the myriad of liberal arts colleges.

This article, which arises out of an empirical study in addition to the author's own observations and experiences, focuses on black student alienation in liberal arts colleges. The study was conducted in a Midwestern college conference. The schools ranged in size from 900 to 1,900 and all are private, four-year institutions. The 267 respondents represent nearly 60 percent of the 449 black students enrolled in the eight colleges in the study.

A standard alienation scale was used in the study.[1] It divides alienation into six components: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social estrangement, and estrangement from work. Each component is measured with a statement to which the respondent agrees or disagrees. Agreement indicates

alienation. The statements, with the component tested by each, are as follows:

1. "There is not much that I can do about most of the important problems that we face today" (powerlessness).
2. "Things have become so complicated in the world today that I really don't understand what is going on" (meaninglessness).
3. "In order to get ahead in the world today, you are almost forced to do some things which are not right" (normlessness).
4. "I am not much interested in the TV programs, movies, or magazines that most people seem to like" (cultural estrangement).
5. "I often feel lonely" (social estrangement).
6. "I don't really enjoy most of the school work that I do, but I feel that I must do it in order to have other things that I need and want" (estrangement from work).

Results

Although levels of powerlessness, meaninglessness, and cultural estrangement were generally quite low, 60.7 percent of the total group evidenced normlessness. Apparently these students feel that one cannot realistically expect to succeed by scrupulously adhering to the rules. When contrasted with low overall powerlessness (30.3 percent), this finding suggests that the students believe that opportunities for advancement and influence do exist, but these opportunities all but evaporate if one keeps his activities within the prevailing normative structure. It is important to bear in mind with this and other results, however, that white students may feel similarly and hence, black-white comparisons should generally be approached with caution.

The greatest overall alienation was indicated on estrangement from work with 61.4 percent. It seems that these students, for the

most part, are in college for largely instrumental (perhaps vocational) reasons. The academic dimension stimulates relatively little intrinsic interest. Academic alienation is a problem of considerable magnitude for black students and is much discussed in the literature.[2] Students regularly voice the legitimate complaint that the entire academic enterprise is permeated with a white perspective, disposing blacks to learn white values, history, and culture.

To the extent that this is true, blacks are being miseducated. For such a monocultural approach to learning has the effect of placing black students under pressure to reject their own culture and outlook in favor of that of the dominant middle class society--a case of intellectual oppression. Such oppression is antithetical to the very essence of education as the liberal arts institution pays intense lip service to the values of diversity and freedom and thought and inquiry. This diversity and freedom should transcend the cultural boundaries of a WASP genre.

In terms of subgroups, fully 46.1 percent of the females living on campus indicated social estrangement. Black coeds are at a number of social disadvantages in these schools. Unrelated to race is the traditional dating practice making it customary for males to initiate interaction. This dating problem is exacerbated by the presence of white females who compete for the attention of the already limited number of black males. This latter, is a sensitive issue among black females and produces a sizable amount intragroup hostility.[3] Furthermore, black females are victim to the twin assault of racism and sexism. The sexism aspect is intensified in the college by the rather strong chauvinist atmosphere present due to the institutions more traditional orientation.

That more than half of the black students came from homes in

which the major wage earner made less than $10,000 annually places them in stark contrast to their largely upper-middle-class white colleagues. As one might expect, the under-$10,000 respondents expressed much more powerlessness (41.0 to 22,5 percent) than those from over-$10,000 backgrounds. Although black student associations offer black students a collective power base from which to address themselves to issues of concern, students in general, wield relatively little power in academic areas of college life. There is almost no available recourse in cases of capricious grading, prejudiced instructors, or unjust disciplinary measures. In fact, higher education, both public and private, is one of the least democratic institutions in American society. As such, it seems surprising that powerlessness levels were not higher.

Students who live on-campus expressed a greater degree of social estrangement than those off-campus--37.3 to 27.5 percent. Greater social estrangement on the part of resident students calls into serious question the consistent tendency of small colleges to describe themselves as harmonious communities. Social estrangement may be a particular problem for these black students as many of them have little opportunity to find relief off-campus, either due to the white suburban nature of the region surrounding it, or to a lack of available means of transportation, virtually grounding them to the campus.

With 80.5 percent of the respondents from urban backgrounds, suburban black students are actually a minority within a minority. Over half (51.7 percent) of the suburbanites living on-campus experienced social estrangement. This does not seem surprising as this group suffers from a dual disadvantage. On one hand,

their suburban status often causes them to be viewed as not "black enough" for their urban black colleagues, while they are racially separated from their more socioeconomically similar white counterparts on the other.

Among college major groups, nursing student responses stood out. Although the majority of nursing majors did not express normlessness or estrangement from work, 60 percent were socially estranged and 50 percent indicated meaninglessness. These results may arise from the rather tightly-structured nature of nursing programs. The demands on one's time and energy made by the nursing programs are such that many students--black and white--regularly allude to the rather socially and educationally segregated lives they are forced to lead.

Ethnocentrism

In summary, it is evident both in terms of the empirical study as well as the authors own observations, that for black students at liberal arts colleges there is desegregation without integration. In fact, a sizable degree of alienation exists. It is my belief that this alienation and lack of integration owes to the fact that colleges of this type are usually closely aligned with a given ethnic-religious group. This alignment can be traced to the very origins of the schools and are an integral part of their institutional identities and distinctiveness. Hence, although black and other non-Anglo students make the student population multiethnic, this pluralism is not often reflected in the educational experience these institutions offer.

As previously noted, liberal arts colleges commonly refer to themselves as communities. However, at the heart of a given college's community ethos is its particular ethnic heritage and denominational

affiliation. The character, values, and ideologies of the school are premised on its ethnic foundations. Black students, never a part of the particular Northern European ethnic stock with which the college identifies, are not genuine members of the college community. Even membership in the denomination with which the school is affiliated is no guarantee of first-class citizenship, as the faith and theology the institution is committed to is often one which has passed through a white ethnocentric filter and hence, is alien to non-white students.

The unidimensionality of the college can be so powerful that the particular monocultural point of view of the school may simply be accepted as "reality" by white faculty and students. There is little awareness that an individual could find the school something other than an equitable, just, and high-quality institution. This ignorance is perhaps the greatest barrier to effective change on the part of the college.

Recommendations

With this in mind, our attention turns to the question regarding what steps colleges can take to reduce alienation and intergroup tension. Before making any specific policy recommendations however, it is necessary to stress that change is the responsibility of the institution, not the black students. Endemic to even federal social programs is the tendency to manipulate and shape those victimized by oppressive circumstances so that they will better adjust to the prevailing conditions, rather than attempt to alleviate injustices. Such a tendency to blame the victim can at best provide only pseudo solutions, as it does not get at the causes of the problems.[4] The litmus test for real progress must be the willingness of the institution to eliminate oppressive patterns and practices in favor of

making itself a truly democratic entity.

What follows is a series of recommended actions liberal arts colleges can take in dealing with black student alienation. The list is neither exhaustive nor particularly bold, but is presented with an awareness that these institutions exist on limited budgets as well as immutable philosophical leanings. It is hoped that these suggestions for action will stimulate further research and discussion of the problems.

--A pressing need is the recruitment of more black and other minority students. Black students hardly ever make up even five percent of a small college student population. Smallness in number is a constantly verbalized concern of black students. It serves to sharpen their sense of minority status and effectively limits their chances of engineering significant change in the college. It is also important that recruitment be broadly based. In the case of males, all too often colleges have focused on athletes--students who in actuality serve the best interests of the college. Such a recruiting emphasis only reinforces the stereotypical image of the black male student as being an empty-headed jock who knows little and cares less about quality education.

--A strong Black Student Association, headed by a Black Student Advisor, is essential. These organizations are vital to the reinforcement of black student identity and the advancement of black cultural espression. In addition, they provide a meeting ground for the articulation black educational needs and concerns.

--Inasmuch as black students are frequently from low-income, crowded, urban high schools, many are not prepared for the rather traditional and exacting academic standards of the liberal arts college. For this reason, it may be necessary to provide tutoring

or other academic assistance to aid students who desire it. To admit black students and accept their tuition monies only to flunk them out after several terms is a serious ethical issue. That small colleges have difficulty finding and recruiting black students who are prepared for the academic rigors of the liberal arts experience only underscores the necessity for academic assistance, as the alternative is an all-white institution.

--Less than half of the colleges in the study had any black faculty. This is particularly regrettable as black faculty provide a necessary liason between the black students and the larger institution. In addition, they serve as stable adult success models and resource persons for those students who are in need of support and encouragement.

--Black cultural expression should not be restricted to an annual collective catharsis occurring during Black Expression Week, but should be evident year round. College events and activities should consistently reflect the presence and interests of non-white students. Anything less impoverishes the educational experience the college offers, robbing it of the richness and multicultural thrust it should have.

--It is important that a first-quality, well-developed Black or Minority Studies Program be instituted. Although controversial, these curricula serve to heighten awareness throughout the institution of the importance of minorities in society.

--Short of an actual curriculum with a minority focus, colleges should at least insist on a periodic academic review in which faculty members assess the content and presentation of their courses with an eye toward meeting the needs of non-Anglo students. Moreover, the college library and audio-visual depart-

ment should examine their holdings in terms of their adequacy in the area of minority emphases.

--A faculty committee on minority education, chaired by the Black Student Advisor, would be of considerable value. Such a committee would regularly review the entire scope of minority education on campus. In addition, it could keep abreast of advances in the area made by other colleges along with those reported in the literature. In any case, it too could raise consciousness regarding black student concerns and issues in the college.

Limitation

A word of caution is pertinent here. Even if the liberal arts college were to adopt the foregoing rec.mmendations along with other more progressive and ambitious ones, it must ultimately confront what may be an insurmountable barrier; its particular ethnic identity and affiliation. For although there is nothing dishonorable about white ethnic pride and institutions reflecting it, this ethnic factor limits a college's ability to fully embrace minority students, as it ties itself to an ethnocentric bias. To be truly democratic, truly pluralistic, an institution should not lean in any particular ethnic direction. However, for the liberal arts college to dissolve its ethnic ties would be tantamount to destroying much of its institutional identity. Furthermore, such an abdication would be an act of institutional suicide--for it would be rejecting the particular ethnic constituency which supports the college with money and freshmen. Hence, the college could be torn between its desire to be pluralistic and its desire to remain loyal to its founding and sustaining ethnic group.

This, however, does not render the situation hopeless by any means. An enormous amount could be accomplished by colleges without violating their given ethnic traditions. And if liberal arts colleges were to make a genuine and effort-filled commitment to diversity and pluralism, they would not only be making the educational experience for black students more enriching, but would be taking a giant step in the direction of what liberal education is truly all about.

[1]Russell Middleton, "Alienation, Race, and Education," American Sociological Review 28 (December 1963): 973-977.

[2]Jack J. Cardoso, "Ghetto Blacks and College Policy," Liberal Education 55 (October 1969): 363-372; Paul E. Wisdom and Kenneth A. Shaw, "Black Challenge to Higher Education," Educational Record 50 (Fall 1969): 351-359; Orlando L. Taylor, "New Directions for American Education: A Black Perspective," Journal of Black Studies 1 (September 1970): 101-112.

[3]Clarence G. Williams and James E. Lyons, "Black Coeds on a White Campus," Integrated Education 10 (September-October 1972): 61-64.

[4]William Ryan, Blaming the Victim (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).